

FRANCO: PROUD RULER OF A HUNGRY PEOPLE

A Report from Spain

PETER SCHMID

MADRID

I FOUND it no easy matter to gain admittance to the reception at which the Italian Ambassador was to present his credentials. Franco is one of the most inaccessible men in contemporary Europe, and even the privileged journalists to whom he grants interviews are mostly loud speakers blaring forth official pronouncements on such matters as Christianity and Gibraltar.

Actually, I could not have brought it off without the intervention of an *amigo*. In Spain everything is difficult, but not impossible—provided one possesses such a sponsor. It must not be thought that the broad range of implication of *amigo* is echoed in our conception of "friend"; there is something rather more soulful about our word, smacking as it does of spiritual community. All this need not figure in an *amigo*. It is enough to ring someone and say: "Mr. So-and-so sends you his best regards," and from the other end of the line you hear: "*Encantado, encantado!*" From that moment, the answering voice calls itself your *amigo*, and every new acquaintance it brings you into contact with also becomes your *amigo* straightaway, so that *amigos* spring up with bewildering rapidity. The only catch—and it is enough to make the

many other Europeans who live here despair—is the fact that contacts with Spaniards seldom amount to more than fugitive relationships. Those subcutaneous bonds without which there can be no real community are almost entirely lacking here. Spain is a nation of twenty-eight million hermits united with one another according to formula. In any consideration of Spanish politics, one must keep in mind the artificiality of all forms of social organization.

With an *amigo*, provided he has the necessary contacts, everything is possible. My *amigo* was the *amigo* of the Master of the Palace. Therefore, while the mounted Moorish guard ambled up with the ancient Bourbon *calèche*, I was able, at close range, to observe the Caudillo as he prepared himself for the reception of the Ambassador. Surrounded by glittering gold braid, leaning on his sword, he stood: Francisco Franco, *Caudillo de España por la gracia de Dios*, to quote the inscription of the coins bearing his likeness. This kingly consciousness of divine grace is unmistakably stamped on his countenance. A dreamy remoteness from the world is reflected in his glance which seems never to meet that of his interlocutor but to flow over and past him into some region of super-human or, rather, non-human transcendence.

Friends who knew the General before he was "chosen" tell me that originally he was a very jovial and sociable person, and that this aspect of enraptured isolation initially made its appearance in the first years of power, growing visibly with each succeeding year. He has become, so they say, a contemner of mankind, ever more repelled by the imperfection of all about him, ever more profoundly convinced of his own infallibility. But this quixotic feature, which shows up strongly enough in photographs of him, is seen to be

OF ALL current political issues, that of the Western democracies' relations with Spain is one of the most thorny and disputed. Is Spain, in its own way, as totalitarian as Nazi Germany or Soviet Russia? How good a "risk" is Franco for the West? This candid first-hand report by PETER SCHMID conveys an appreciation of the complexities involved in trying to reach an answer to such questions. Mr. Schmid is a Swiss journalist, literary critic, and inveterate globe-trotter. His article "Indonesia Sips the Wine of Independence" appeared in the June 1951 issue of COMMENTARY. The present article has been translated from German by Felix Giovanelli.

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As I mentally compared this reception with the solemnity of similar events in other countries, I could not help thinking that the austere Spanish *grandezza* had declined here to a kind of ironical, not to say insolent, attitude. This was, however, not altogether to be wondered at, considering the tiresome regularity with which ambassadors are accustomed to dance attendance every Thursday.

For the capitulation of the West before Spanish inflexibility means a triumph for the Caudillo that his people savor with thorough relish. As is untiringly maintained in speeches and newspaper articles, he is the man who was right all along while the other statesmen were wrong, the man who steadily trained his quixotic ideological eye on the devil in Stalin while others sought to stroke his fur the right way; and, on the other hand, he is the man who, with the peasant cunning of a Sancho Panza, was able to slip out of Hitler's clutches by presenting his confederate a bill in advance for his possible entry into the war—one which he knew would be too steep for acceptance. Franco is a Galician by birth, and in all Spain this folk of the northwestern part of the peninsula is famed for its dangerous cunning, for the virtuosity with which it cloaks its true purposes. Far from being offended, Spaniards are delighted when doubts are cast on the uprightness of their policies. "Till now he has got the better of everybody," a Falangist colleague boasted in my presence, "Hitler, Mussolini, Stalin—and he will be ready for the Americans."

This overwhelmingly triumphal attitude, according to which Spain is seen as a spoiled darling to be courted indefinitely and unconditionally, is diffused to a dangerous degree throughout the ruling circle. A will prevails to get as much as possible out of the current situation and it is not to be excluded that Spanish overeagerness will strain the bow to the snapping point. The commentaries that

accompanied Franco's claim to Gibraltar were not far from reflecting a gloating pleasure over England's difficulties abroad. For no other reason than to needle Paris, Marshal Pétain was offered asylum in Spain, and a box of oranges ostentatiously sent to him. And when the last seven war criminals were executed at Landsberg, the official newspaper *Arriba* felt impelled to say that Americans were war criminals like all the rest.

The gesture of reconciliation made by the West with the return of its diplomats has called forth no similar gesture from the other side; it has, on the contrary, reinforced the dogmatic resolve to demand everything without offering anything. In this, there is no doubt that it is Don Quixote, and not the realistic Sancho Panza, who holds the reins. "Franco is, politically, a clever tactician," an old army man who had known him from way back declared, "but a poor strategist. I mean, he is very good at muddling through from situation to situation but he is utterly incapable of a long-range view. Just because of his recent triumph, don't exaggerate his diplomatic skill. The same factor that has in matters of foreign policy reared a triumphal arch for him—the threat of war by the Soviet Union—is grinding away, internally, at the pillars upon which his power rests. Unfortunately, dazzled by his success, he shows every sign of having forgotten at what tremendous sacrifice to his people he has purchased it." In fact, Spain does present something of the ominous atmosphere of the fourth act of classical tragedy: the moment when the hero has achieved the pinnacle of power, everything seems to be going well, and Destiny is already rapping inexorably at the door.

AFTER the reception at the Royal Palace, our taxi passed the Moorish guard that was escorting the Ambassador back to his palace. The chauffeur turned around and, waving a contemptuous hand at the receding splendor, remarked: "And the people are hungry." This was, to be sure, an undeserved rebuke inasmuch as a few hundred ceremonial soldiers and the unavoidable expenses arising from diplomatic protocol cannot rep-

resent a very sizable drain on the budget. But unjust or not, it is typical. Into whatever part of Spain one goes, with whatever man of the common people one speaks, the conversation inevitably turns within the first five minutes to the same old theme: hunger. From the moment rearmament began to drive world prices up, *hambre* became, from Andalusia to the land of the Basques, a kind of watchword weighing obsessively on the spirits of men.

A foreigner is often tempted to underestimate the difficulties under which the Spaniards labor to keep body and soul together. Strolling through the streets one sees neatly if plainly dressed people. A glance at the shop windows reveals rich displays of the most exquisite delicacies at prices that are readily within one's reach if one has money from outside Spain. (The only exceptions are a few scarce commodities like coffee or sugar, which fetch prices on the black market that would seem to us incredible.) Spain is a land of cheap vacations because pesetas are easy to get hold of if one has another currency with which to buy them. For the Spaniards, however, they come very dear because salaries are low even by European standards.

Something amiss is noticeable at the very outset when one has his shoes shined by one of the *limpiabotas* who are thickly concentrated in all the streets with their boxes and brushes, for all one pays is a peseta, or two at the most—that is, from two to four cents. It is the rate prevailing in Cairo or Calcutta; but even in Syria, or in Japan, one pays double that. A similar condition exists all the way down the line. A construction worker earns 15 to 18 pesetas daily (30 to 36 cents), a farm hand about 20. Even the policeman, who, after all, performs an important and responsible public function, does not make more than 600 pesetas a month. An office worker makes about 800, a teacher from 1,000 to 1,200. A bank manager receives a nominal salary of 3,000 pesetas a month; had he not the opportunity for lucrative supplementary earnings, he too would have to be his own cook and bottle-washer. For a modest meal in a restaurant comes to at least 30 to 40 pesetas; a suit not under 700, a pair of shoes

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Undeniably, the complaint heard across the length and breadth of the country makes sense: with such prices, living has become impossible. Hunger is no longer a figure of speech, it is a reality. I have spoken with mothers who had not tasted sugar for months because they felt they had to sacrifice their meager ration to their children.

MISERY speaks in divers tongues, depending on geography and temperament. I have sat in Andalusian country taverns and, in company with the local folk, have drunk their mediocre wine while we ate snails soaked in vinegar. They accepted their destiny with a gloomy fatalism, without searching out causes and solutions. When I spoke of land reform and the reparceling of huge landed estates, they would shrug their shoulders. They knew large-scale irrigation and expensive capital equipment would be needed, and they did not see where either would come from. According to their view of the world, men may do what they may—things will not get better but, on the contrary, will be worse.

The word "strike" haunted the working classes of the Andalusian cities toward the end of April. The example of Barcelona and Bilbao was proving contagious, and even without benefit of newspapers the humblest were astonishingly well-informed as to all details of the events in the North. But by May 1, streetcars and trains were running as usual; the good Andalusians are voluble speakers but run few risks.

I found the poetic transfiguration of hunger in Galicia, that sister land to dreamy Ireland, with which it shares a common Celtic heritage. The workingman with whom I was sitting in the tavern pointed with a melancholy smile to the ham that hung juicily over the counter. "A kilogram costs 80 pesetas," he said wistfully. "Four days' pay. I can't afford it. It's only for men with money. All I can do is look at it devoutly as I would at a crucifix."

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despite such never ending complaints, no perceptibly active will to upheaval was present, except perhaps for industrial Bilbao, where an unruly Basque separatist and independence movement keeps itself in readiness for rebellion, even though conditions in general seem better there than in such poverty-stricken regions as Andalusia and Galicia. Even the strikes, which broke out last spring rather violently in Barcelona, Pamplona, and Bilbao, and, in a milder form, agitated Madrid, were planned less as decisive struggles than as simple demonstrations. And they ebbed away without any actual consequence except for a few meaningless reductions in prices.

I HAVE discussed aspects of the strikes at great length with Spanish friends. How was it that the passionate Spaniards displayed such classical restraint? And was there a guiding hand discernible, which suddenly, out of the shadow of illegality, revealed itself in political action? On this point there was much speculation, but nobody seems to know what really happened. There was for instance a government communiqué on the strike in the Biscayan region, in which names of arrested leading personalities were announced—and their connections with underground organizations. What truth this official announcement contained was mingled with very evident fiction intended to prove that first, foreign influences, second, the Communists, and third, the Freemasons, had acted as crafty seducers of the working classes (analogous to the Jewish-Marxist-plutocratic bogey conjured up by Hitler). In contradiction, there was the report, almost certainly authentic, that it was none other than the government party, the Falange, which had unleashed the Barcelona strike, with the purpose of unseating a very unpopular and corrupt governor.

But whatever conspiratorial elements did exist, they played a far less important organizational role than the will of an exploited people looking for a chance to pour out its troubles and wrath. Word must have been passed along from person to person: the dem-

onstration was as elemental and spontaneous as a sudden squall and rapidly spread far beyond its point of origin.

One must not overestimate the importance of underground organizations, insofar as they can be said to exist. As is known, the majority of the political prisoners were released in 1946 under conditions of *libertad vigilada*, according to which they must report periodically to the police but are free to pursue their callings. Most of these people continue, naturally, to be potential enemies of the regime; with them are associated others known to the police as enemies of the government but who are not necessarily arrested because of it. In conspiratorial lingo they are *quemado*, "marked" or "branded," and hence unsuited for real revolutionary activity since they would be eliminated at the very outset. In this category can be counted the famous Duchess of Valencia, who calmly plays at conspiracy with other "branded" politicians in her elegant Madrid home—nothing happens to her except when she wanders too far out of bounds.

An erstwhile socialist politician in whose company I was sitting in a public place in Granada suddenly grew silent when a man sat down at the next table, then made for the door. "I don't want my dossier expanded," he explained outside. When I asked about the possibilities of an effective underground organization, he roundly discounted them, explaining that the number of informers was so great that nothing significant could be kept hidden from the watchful eyes of the police for any length of time. On the other hand, the police themselves are permeated with opposition elements, as is evidenced by the fact that the guerrillas, who are still active in the Ronda mountains and the Sierra Nevada, are kept closely informed of all moves planned against them.

THE great unknown is the amorphous, politically unorganized mass, which suddenly revealed itself during the strikes as a power transcending parties, in a series of acts that fizzled out, to be sure, but did re-awaken a consciousness of the people's capacity for action, a capacity that might, some day, set

more specific goals for itself. That the Spaniards continue to stay put, is chiefly due to their indecision about what next. In the last twenty-five years they have tried practically every system of political organization, and none has worked. From the monarchy they turned to bourgeois democracy, which glided into socialism and Communism, which in turn made way for a traditional military dictatorship as the only means of breaking a deadlock. Consequently, the Spanish people feel a political skepticism bordering on utter hopelessness.

On April 30, about midnight, I asked a porter in the harbor of Málaga whether he was in favor of the strike announced for the next day. He shook his head and expressed himself as a fanatical, belligerent adherent of Franco. I invited the man to a glass of wine and began to question him. He had fought in the Civil War as a member of the Guardia Civil and had been so badly wounded that he had had to be mustered out of the service. He received a monthly pension of 150 pesetas (a little over three dollars!) and, although practically an invalid, had to drudge away at odd jobs. Wild rage welled under the surface of loyalty, yet he was ready once more to take up arms for the Caudillo. "Just consider," he declared, displaying a surprising degree of knowledge of historical detail, "in 1870 we imported an Italian prince and set him on the Spanish throne. He remained through two years of complete chaos, after which he renounced the Spanish crown forever, in his own name and that of his descendants. He was a very intelligent man. He had recognized a simple fact: Spain is not governable. And that is why any stable regime, no matter how bad, is bound to be better than any other." This old, embittered porter can stand as a symbol of the whole Spanish people. The fury is there. But it does not vent itself on anything.

To put it more precisely: not yet. It is quite possible that with the first blood-letting, instincts would be awakened in the mass, and means revealed that hitherto had been unknown to it. In any case, it is significant that even now there are those who reckon

with the possibility of a shipwreck and would like to keep at least two forepaws planted on dry land. This search for an "alibi" is quite clearly observable in the Church, which once went along through thick and thin with a regime that, as a prominent member of Catholic Action assured me, had given it a power it had never known since the days of Ferdinand and Isabella.

IN POINT of fact, Franco's seizure of power in Spain does present a certain analogy to the time of "Their Catholic Majesties." The latter were confronted by the task of uniting a land which, by virtue of geographic and ethnic differences, was sharply divided by opposing tendencies. The one ideological bond that could unite all was Catholicism, and through it the *Reconquista*, the expulsion of the Moors from the holy soil of Spain, was accomplished. Ever since, Catholicism has been as much a political idea as a religious one—if not more.

In this fact can be seen the reason for the unpleasant surprise that awaits a European or American in quest of the "deeper" mystical Spain. I have spoken with Princes of the Church and zealous Catholic propagandists and I have met only two persons, of modest station, who struck me as really pious in a deep, substantial sense: one was an officer, the other a young Carmelite monk. The prelates seemed to me uncommonly clever men of the world, skilled in the art of wielding power. Elsewhere in Europe, among good Catholics in Germany, France, or England, a conversation can immediately be struck up on the differences among communions, a conversation rooted in human aspirations, in which the quest for peace of soul is seen as the goal of religion, in which the efforts of different communions to find a way to that goal are seen as something open to discussion. But among Spanish Catholics one might as well talk to a stone wall. Here, arguments are to no avail, there can be no discussion of what, in their eyes, constitutes immutable and self-evident truth. Among Spanish Catholics I found myself in a position similar to that experienced on encountering convinced

Communists. In both instances it was as though talk was going on in completely different languages.

For this reason, visitors in Spain are more repelled than impressed by the magnificent processions of Holy Week. The images of the crucified Christ and the *mater dolorosa* are carried through the streets before a gaping throng that celebrates the Mysteries as it would a bull-fight, that is, as a gratifying spectacle.

What I say here must not be taken as the last word on the subject, for this profanation of the sacred can also be viewed as a hallowing of the profane. A complete obliteration of boundaries has been effected and it is at least arguable whether this might not represent a higher form of religion than our clear-cut separation of spheres of experience. It is also arguable whether the Spanish religion should be regarded as Christian, whether a deeply rooted paganism has not here decked itself in a Christian mantle. But all this is beside the point. I am merely trying to supply background to the fact that Catholicism in Spain plays a preeminently worldly role. People call themselves Catholic here as others would conservative or nationalist elsewhere. "*Soy católico*" means: "I am a decent, loyal Spanish subject." Hence the problem of religious freedom in Spain is a difficult one to solve: a Protestant is regarded at the very outset as an enemy of the state and in a sense is such, because, according to all experience, non-Catholics tend almost inevitably to gravitate to opposition groups. This is a perfectly logical outcome when it is considered that Catholicism has become a kind of state ideology, with the clergy advancing arm in arm with the politicians.

THIS centuries-long process of secularization of spiritual power has created a dangerous situation, inasmuch as the anti-governmental skepticism of Spaniards carries over to the Church and brings about the paradoxical circumstance that a Spaniard can be a Catholic and an enemy of the Church at one and the same time. So, it is very characteristic that in all revolutionary upheavals the

Church and clergy should figure as the first victims, precisely because these have so long been identified with a social system that has become unbearable. All of which may not keep the firebrands from remorsefully returning to church a week later for confession.

Out of a knowledge of this untenable situation, which cost the Church a considerable and bloody toll during the Civil War, a movement has since sprung up marked by a concern for social reform, which seeks to combat Marxism in the spirit of Pope Pius XII, that is, by taking over its postulates in a Catholic sense and realizing them. Martín-Sánchez, one of the most influential figures in Acción Católica, is a landed proprietor and, for some years, has been fighting for land reform. And Ángel Herrera, the Bishop of Málaga, has just recently laid down the principles of an equitable distribution of the great landed estates, in a series of speeches which were reproduced prominently, if in censored form, in the press.

It cannot be denied that the Church has shrewdly utilized the influence accorded it. The blood of thousands of martyrs killed during the Civil War, the fact that not one of these renounced his fealty, proved to be a sowing which is still bearing fruit. Above all, the young, who are subjected almost from the first breath they draw to an ideological bombardment in school and youth organizations by the Church, are to be seen attending Mass in relatively greater numbers than in any other country. Even if such pious zeal is often no more than lip service, the fact cannot be denied that Catholicism does condition the thinking of all young Spaniards, even of the insurgents in their midst. It is significant that the Falange, which was first modeled on the Italian Fascist pattern and originally moved in an anti-clerical element, was unable to hold on to its ideological baggage, so that today it is a hollow shell, a mere apparatus whose only spiritual capital is, in the last analysis, Catholicism.

As has been said, Franco's position is, in this respect, similar to that of "Their Catholic Majesties." He too completed a *Reconquista* under the sign of the cross against a

20th-century Islam; the cross is still the sign under which his following is massed. Spaniards show no sign of breaking out of the magic circle of their religiosity. On the other hand, the Church has, in the last few months, begun to revise its attitude toward the regime. The Cardinal-Primate of Toledo suddenly announced in April that the state has its tasks and the Church hers, and that the areas of responsibility must be sharply divided. Martin-Sánchez was allowed to receive the Order of Isabella the Catholic, conferred on him recently by the government, but strong expressions of disapproval were heard from Catholic Action circles. All these are storm signals, and, very possibly, so are the not unfounded reports that political bigwigs are salting away money in great quantities in Switzerland and Uruguay.

THERE is only one *deus ex machina* which can stave off impending mischief: the dollar. The strikes have affected the United States both favorably and unfavorably. On the one hand, Spain is not so stable as its untroubled surface had allowed one to suppose; but on the other, popular resistance is in only a small degree political, and is, rather, an outgrowth of material despair. In other words, the enemy in Spain is not Communism but, quite simply, hunger, which can be stilled.

The big question comes down to one thing: whether the dollars, which Franco expects with the same confidence that he would await daybreak after a long night, will be applied effectively to the bettering of conditions. I am not referring here to official corruption—which is after all in the best Spanish tradition, though aggravated by small salaries and the need to pick up extra income—but to that honorable beggar's pride which will not allow even the benefactor to meddle in Spanish matters, as that same benefactor has done in the case of the Marshall Plan beneficiaries, with their approval. Viewed realistically, the question is no longer whether Franco will direct his regime along more democratic lines but quite simply whether his regime is capable of governing.

It is unjust to qualify the Spanish government simply as reactionary. If Spain preens itself on having the most advanced social legislation in the world—what with insurances of all kinds: hospital, old-age, large-families—this claim is well founded. But the other side of the shield reveals a bureaucratically interventionist economy and an isolationist drive to autarchy which paralyzes private initiative and discourages foreign capital. The result is that an increase in production, which alone could bring about a really higher standard of living, is, to an unimaginable degree, made more difficult, and hence indefinitely deferred. The innate Spanish lack of discipline struggles with the help of lies and bribery against bureaucratic resistance, in such wise that the legal lattice-work is practically not to be seen under a quite grotesquely intertwined growth of illegality.

I find it hard to believe that this condition would be improved by another regime; every reform issuing from the state is somehow swallowed up in the Spanish jungle. That is why it is idle to discuss what kind of state would be better for this country. One is tempted to apply to the present Spanish situation, taken as a whole, the words of a celebrated conservative politician of the 19th century, Romero Robledo: "Things will not better themselves of themselves, nor is there any who can better them, nor is it better that they should be bettered." The practical consequence of such an attitude is muddling through. Spain is like an ancient house, whose first floor is inhabited by millionaires and its basement by have-nots; the latter would like to live upstairs, but everyone has long since given up any thought of moving into a new building. Quite the contrary: if the neighbors should take it into their heads to offer a blueprint that would tear down the dangerously decayed walls, there would be shrieks from above and cries of bloody murder from below—and millionaires and have-nots would be united as never before. There is no remedy at hand except concrete reinforcements and attendance upon the will of heaven.